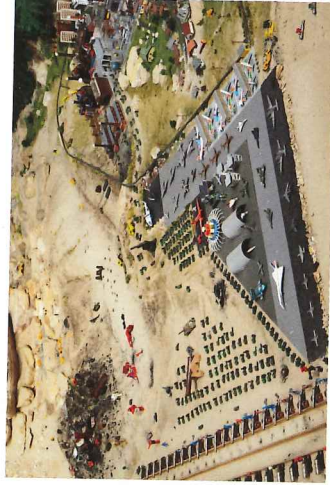


'Chris Burden: Extreme Measures' in New York

CONVERSATION PIECES

The singular feature that seems to connect Burden's work over his forty-year career is that each project presents a different solution to the problem of what people need to experience in order for them to believe something. This is less the notion of dispositional belief, which leads people to act on their beliefs, but the kind of belief that justifies one's accepting religions, newspapers or stories as credible accounts of particular events. While visiting 'White Light/White Heat', Burden's 1975 gallery exhibition, the critic Robert Horvitz recalls not "knowing for a fact" whether he was really lying on the shelf, so he jumped high to try to get a glimpse, but never actually saw him. He wrote, "I can't see him, but I believe he is there." To inspire particular beliefs regarding his early endurance feats, Burden typically exhibits the slimmest amount of evidence, tenuous photographs accompanied by related relics that goad desired inferences.

To inspire beliefs about his recent sculptures' extraordinary capabilities, he exhibits spectacular prototypes such as a flying steamroller, brawny bridges built from toy erector sets, the gold-in-got 'Tower of Power' (1985/2013) now worth 4.3 million US-dollar, two generations of handmade remote-controlled sail boats, two reproductions



Chris Burden, 'Extreme Measures' at New Museum, New York, 2013, courtesy New Museum, New York, photo Benoit Paillley

of the Tower of London's Namur Mortar, and twin 'quasi-legal' skyscraper skeletons. With this survey, one realizes that his ongoing fascination with hand-constructed objects dates to 1981 with his 'Tale of Two Cities', two sprawling cities comprised of five-thousand toys.

Even if Burden never actually hid inside a locker for five days during his MFA show, got shot, crawled through glass shards wearing only Speedo briefs, inhabited a shelf without food for 22 days, did any of the dare-devil stunts attributed to him, and all of his improbable sculptures failed to perform as alleged, he would still be an especially great artist. In 1976, Horvitz noted that the success of Burden's "blurry, scratched, over- or under-exposed" performance documents, here casually presented in two self-published binders (1971-1973 and 1973-1977), confirmed Marshall McLuhan's claim that low-definition images evoke a greater degree of viewer empathy and fantasy-projection than high-definition ones.



Chris Burden, 'Extreme Measures' at New Museum, New York, 2013, courtesy New Museum, New York, photo Benoit Paillley

Given the dearth of actual eyewitness accounts, Burden leaves the "burden of proof" to the spectator's imagination, thus obstructing the growth of divergent evidence.

RELIGIOUS OVERTONES

Absent proof to the contrary, I have no good reason to debunk any of Burden's projects as stunts, illusions, hoaxes, fakes, myths or rumors. I do however find their liminal status wonderfully appealing. Burden's oeuvre exhibits religious overtones both in terms of his extreme physical sacrifices made for his art, as well as the necessity of spectator faith, enabling his performances to persist as what Horvitz calls "conversation pieces." Occupying an oral status amidst our shared cultural history, they drive spectators' expectations and arouse artists' aspirations. Over the years, I have encountered numerous people who actually claim to have attended one of his performances,

which is highly unlikely. It seems that repeat conversations can even spark personal memories. When interviewed in 1996, Burden didn't seem overly concerned that he lacked the time and money to get the first generation of 'Ghost Ships' actually sailing, adding "a symbolic gesture can be significant because ideas do have power." And in fact, the strength of Burden's ideas to prompt the imagination is what makes his work so striking. This survey fails to explore his early use of television as an art medium focused on mediated experience. In addition to taping commercials, buying ad time on late-night television, or performing live acts on television such as his infamous 'TV Hijack' (1972); he broadcast tapes of past performances such as his glass-crawling feat. Armed with his awareness of television's impact, it now seems as though he transposed T.V.'s capacity to mediate beliefs onto his later performance documentation and eventual sculptures. One video, 'The Rapt' (2006) is not a performance document, but a hilarious artwork all its own featuring him recounting some story in French. Offering a forty-year study on the psychology of persuasion, Burden's oeuvre proves that even second-hand experiences engender beliefs. The great thing about his work is that you don't actually have to see it to believe it (or in it), but seeing it invites you to test your beliefs about his art's dubious possibilities.

Sue SPAID

Chris Burden, 'Extreme Measures' in New Museum, New York till January 12, 2014. www.newmuseum.org